

Hard to imagine unless you have been through an armistice how fast the ceasefire happens the first week of January at the end of hunting season.

On closing day, the pastures resound with the mortal bloop of soft-pointed lead propelled at high speed hitting meat and bone. Up until the final hour, I cringe at the sound of every distant volley.

As I reported before, I descend from a faint-hearted line. My greatest of great grandmothers fled with her five children to Fort Concho from the ranch in the 1870s, frightened by the Comanches going on the warpath. Great grandfather admitted in his dotage that during the War of Northern Aggression, he broke out in goose pimples when the bluecoats charged, sabers drawn and bayonets aimed at chest level.

However, in spite of the peril, the November whitetail deer season attracts a lot of extra business to the shortgrass country. On opening day, the county roads billow with the dust of bright new pickups racing to the leases. The road going through the ranch takes on a silver tinsel of newcrop aluminum cans. In every outpost, all parties from the gasoline grinders to the feed stores celebrate the arrival of the free-spending redcaps.

By nightfall, lights from the hunting camps change the landmarks on the skyline on the way to the ranch. Takes a week for the new subscribers to locate their pastures. Car

lights shine nearly any night as hunters turn into our north mill, three or four miles off course and two or three fences removed from the right boundary. It's easier to pick up the beer cans the next morning at the mill than it is go over at night to give directions and ask them to take their empties with them.

Difficult to tell whether any of the redcaps are lost and never found. They dress in such elaborate jungle costume the only way to find one once he goes down is to spot the reflection from the keeper on his bowie knife sheath, or maybe catch sight of his gold fillings when he yawns.

Waiting for a next of kin or missing person bulletin for a lost hunter is a lot like the way mothers looked for strayed kids during the Great Depression. We were lucky the school called the roll on weekdays and Sunday school superintendents reported attendance on Sunday, or we'd have been the lost generation for sure, not just in the eyes of our critics. Only time a skip-out was ever missed was at lamb marking or shearing time. Sure didn't take a detective to figure out why the Christmas stockings included a road map stuffed in the toe.

Doesn't mean hunters don't stick together. The hunting camps are bound together in a grand camaraderie making the mystic brotherhood of the Freemasons and Elks look like the organization of a summer softball team at a Boy Scout camp. Down at the corrals we call the Old Barn, gnawed-over steak bones and fried oyster shells are scattered on the ground,

signifying a ritual of brotherhood, the way the Karankawa Indians left cooking middens on the Gulf Coast. Dainty cans of smoked fish lie among empty bottles of the richest years of French vintage. The finest shelled corn from the fields of the Midwest, bought for deer feed, rides in the backs of the handsomest vehicles known to Germany or Japan, past flocks of woollies and herds of hollow horns lucky to get a handout from a rusty pickup bed.

Not since the days of the King's royal hunting parks and the indentured gamekeepers has there been such class disparity as between the hunters and the ranchers. So much time has passed since my outfit was able to afford bulk corn to winter our old ewes, the bottom rusted out of the granary. I am ashamed to drive by the Old Barn when the whole fleet of new trucks and vans is in camp. To work cattle downwind from the rich foods grilling on the cooking fires is sheer agony. It is a good thing the cooking makes your mouth salivate, as I'd die of thirst before I'd drink from the tank in front of hombres who sip French mineral water.

But come the end of the season, the high-stepping redcaps and all their colorful style migrate back to the cities, like mountain bluebirds suddenly leave in one day to go south. In town the gas pumps clear and the cash registers are quiet. By the end of January, they are calling us again to ask about next fall's prospects. And the harder our game becomes, the more eager we are to do business.